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BOB CHANCELLOR/JOHANNESBURG

SOUTH AFRICAN MULTI-RACIAL NIGHTCLUBS

ANNCR:

THERE'S A NEW PHENOMENON IN SOUTH AFRICAN ENTERTAINMENT, AND VOA'S BOB CHANCELLOR REPORTS FROM JOHANNESBURG:

VOICE:

THE FREQUENT VISITOR TO JOHANNESBURG IS SURPRISED THESE DAYS TO FIND MULTI-RACIAX NIGHTCLUBS POPPING UP IN SOUTH AFRICA'S LARGEST CITY. BY ALL THE STANDARDS OF THIS COUNTRY'S STRICT APARTHEID, OR RACIAL SEPARATION, LAWS, SUCH PLACES SHOULDN'T EXIST. BUT THEY DO. THERE ARE FIVE OR SIX MULTI-RACIAL NIGHTCLUBS OPERATING NOW, AND AT LEAST TWO MORE WILL OPEN SOON. THEY ALL SEEM TO BE THRIVING WITH LITTLE OR NO GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE.

MOST OF THE CLUBS ARE IN LARGE BARN-LIKE ROOMS WITH FLASHING LIGHTS, GLEAMING DAY-GLOW COLORS AND BOOMING ROCK MUSIC. ON THE DANCE FLOOR ARE YOUNG WHITE PROFESSIONALS AND BUSINESSMEN, BLACKS WHO HAVE INCREASINGLY MORE MONEY TO SPEND ON ENTERTAINMENT AND ON THE LATEST FASHIONABLE CLOTHES, INDIANS, AND COLORED -- OR MIXED-RACE -- PEOPLE WHO TEND TO IDENTIFY MORE WITH WHITE LIFE STYLES BUT WHO USUALLY ARE DENIED THE OPPORTUNITY. FOR THE MOST PART, COUPLES SEEM TO BE OF THE SAME RACE, BUT ON A CROWDED DANCE FLOOR, WHO CAN TELL?

SUCH A MULTI-RACIAL SCENE WOULD N O T BE UNUSUAL ANYWHERE ELSE ON THE CONTINENT BUT IT'S UNEXPECTED HERE. AND THERE ARE MORE THEORIES ABOUT WHY THE CLUBS ARE PERMITTED TO OPERATE THAN THERE ARE CLUBS OPERATING. SOME PEOPLE BELIEVE THE POLICE AND THE GOVERNMENT ARE SIMPLY TURNING A BLIND EYE TOWARD THEM, PERHAPS TO IMPROVE JOHANNESBURG'S REPUTATION AS A DULL TOWN FOR TOURISTS. ONE LONG-TIME

OBSERVER OF SOUTH AFRICAN COUNTRY'S POLITICS AND RACE RELATIONS SAYS SOMEWHAT CYNICALLY THAT TOLERANCE OF THE CLUBS INDICATES NO CHANGE IN GOVERNMENT POLICY -- THAT IT'S SIMPLY BIG BUSINESS, AND "MONEY TALKS." BUT THE OPERATOR OF ONE OF THE NEW CLUBS TOLD VOA THAT THE GOVERNMENT WANTS THESE PLACES TO SPRING UP. HE SAYS THINGS HAVE CHANGED A LOT. THIS CLUB OPERATOR BELIEVES THAT ONLY IF DRUGS SHOW UP OR VIOLENCE OCCURS WILL THE POLICE STEP IN.

ONE SENIOR POLICE OFFICIAL, ASKED ABOUT THE CLUBS, SAYS "WE DON'T WORRY ABOUT THEM EXCEPT SOME WHICH HAVE NO LIQUOR LICENSE." ALTHOUGH OPERATORS ARE RELUCTANT TO TALK ABOUT IT, APPARENTLY SOME OF THEM DON'T HAVE LIQUOR LICENSES. BUT WITH AN ADMISSION CHARGE OF NEARLY FIVE DOLLARS PER PERSON, AND INFLATED PRICES AT THE BAR, THOSE OPERATORS APPARENTLY CONSIDER IT A WORTHWHILE RISK (OPT) A LOOPHOLE IN THE LAW ALLOWS MANY OF THE CLUBS TO EXIST. THE GROUP AREAS ACT, WHICH DESIGNATES CERTAIN PARTS OF THE CITY FOR BUSINESSES OR HOMES ONLY FOR PARTICULAR RACIAL GROUPS. HAS SOME GAPS IN ITS COVERAGE. THUS, CERTAIN NEIGHBORHOODS ARE UNDESIGNATED. THESE ARE GENERALLY IN INDUSTRIAL-FRINGE AREAS AND THAT'S WHERE MOST OF THE MULTI-RACIAL CLUBS HAVE BEEN ESTABLISHED. (END OPT)

SEVERAL MONTHS AGO, THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT ALLOWED SOME HOTELS TO BE DESIGNATED AS INTERNATIONAL HOTELS -- PERMITTED TO HOUSE AND FEED PEOPLE OF ALL RACES. BUT EVEN IN THE INTERNATIONAL HOTELS, NON-WHITES ARE N O T ALLOWED ON THE DANCE FLOOR. JOHANNESBURG'S CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT ASSOCIATION HAS BEEN URGING THE DESEGREGATION OF ALL OR MOST RESTAURANTS IN THE DOWNTOWN

AREA. THE GOVERNMENT HAS PROMISED SYMPATHETIC CONSIDERATION OF INDIVIDUAL APPLICATIONS, AND RESTAURANT DESEGREGATION IS EXPECTED SOON -- ALTHOUGH THE GOVERNMENT HAS BALKED AT BLANKET OPENING OF ALL RESTAURANTS TO ALL RACES.

AN OFFICIAL OF THE BUSINESS ASSOCIATION HAS EXPRESSED FEAR THAT THE MULTI-RACIAL NIGHTCLUBS AND DISCOTHEQUES MAY JEOPARDIZE THE HOPE FOR CHANGE IN RESTAURANTS, PARTICULARLY IF THE POLICE DECIDE TO CRACK DOWN ON THE NIGHTCLUBS.

THE RACE RELATIONS CORRESPONDENT OF THE RAND DAILY MAIL OBSERVES THAT PERHAPS PEOPLE WILL LEARN SOMETHING FROM THEIR EXPERIENCES IN THE NEW CLUBS. HE SAYS SOME WHITE PATRONS END THE EVENING IN CONVERSATION WITH PARTIES OF BLACKS OR COLORED, AND HE ASKS: "WHO WOULD DENY THE SOCIOLOGICAL VALUE OF INTELLIGENT PEOPLE CRASHING RACIAL BARRIERS IN THIS HARMLESS WAY?"

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WJL/RCS